

May 11, 2024

Lauren Weinstock, PhD
40 Carriage Lane
Kingston, RI 02881

RE: Bill H7035, IN FAVOR OF

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

I am writing to you to request that you please support Bill H7035, "RELATING TO BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE, DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AND HOSPITALS – COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES," appropriating the sum of one million eight hundred seventy-five thousand dollars (\$1,875,000) of federal funds contained in the state fiscal recovery fund for the creation of a 9-8-8 hotline to maintain compliance with the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 and the Federal Communications Commission-adopted rules to assure that all citizens receive a consistent level of 9-8-8 and crisis behavioral health services.

I write in support of this bill as a clinical psychologist, Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at Brown University, suicide prevention researcher and advocate, and RI resident. As you may be aware, our national rate of suicide has increased roughly 30% over the past 20 years, despite enormous efforts to develop, evaluate, and disseminate evidence-based interventions for suicide prevention. Although nearly 48,000 people die by suicide in the US annually, the rate of suicide attempt is nearly 30x this number, with approximately 1.4 million suicide attempts reported per year. The most updated statistics reveal that, in Rhode Island, we experience 1 suicide death every 3 days. This number translates to the 14th leading cause of death overall in our state, and for certain subgroups – particularly youth and young adults – suicide is currently the 3rd leading cause of death.

In 2022, the federal government launched the 988 initiative - to increase accessibility and reach of the suicide and crisis lifeline at a national scale. Yet the initial infrastructure to establish 988 was just a start; the federal government has made clear that it is the states' responsibility to fund the services in a sustainable fashion.

This unfunded roll-out has been especially complicated given that the 988 number has achieved its aim of increased accessibility. Between January – March of this year, 2,543 calls to 988 were routed to Rhode Island, a *58% increase* compared to the same time frame in 2023. Without adequate funding, I have heard anecdotes from people with lived experience of suicidal thoughts and urges that they have been placed on hold for long wait times while trying to access 988 in RI - or they have been triaged to crisis line staff in other states, who are unfamiliar with the triage and referral landscape in RI.

The message is clear - NOW is the critical moment to act on H7035, in order to make 988 funding in RI a reality by supporting the appropriation before you and by considering a future in which state budget funding for 988 has been codified through a revolving 988 trust fund (consisting of state appropriations, grants, gifts, and any fee money dedicated to 988 in the future for the purpose of implementing, maintaining, and improving the 988 system, including call centers, mobile crisis response teams, and crisis stabilization services).

If you are interested in how RI compares to our neighboring states, I urge you to consult this map.

<https://reimaginecrisis.org/map/>

Permanent, sustainable funding, similar to how we fund 911, is needed for our 988 system to meet these growing community crisis needs and to ensure access to a full continuum of crisis services for all Rhode Islanders, which includes mobile response teams and crisis stabilization centers in addition to our crisis call centers.

Thank you very much for your time and attention,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lauren Weinstock". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Lauren" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Weinstock".

Lauren Weinstock, PhD